

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 COLOMBO 001838

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS
NSC FOR E.MILLARD
PLEASE ALSO PASS TOPEC

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/09/2014

TAGS: [PREL](#) [KISL](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: MUSLIM ROLE IN PEACE PROCESS LARGELY
IRRELEVANT

REF: COLOMBO 1794 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: James F. Entwistle, Deputy Chief of Mission. 1.4 (b,d)

1. (C) SUMMARY. The majority of Muslims in Sri Lanka live in the southern, western and central regions of the country, are traders and businesspeople, and support the largest political parties, the leaderships of which are dominated by the Sinhalese majority. In contrast, Muslims in the east are farmers and fishermen and support more "communal" Muslim political parties. Eastern Muslims and Muslims from the rest of the country are largely indifferent to each other's political concerns. Years of conflict led eastern Muslims to organize politically, an endeavor which was initially successful and gave them power in forming governments. Now, however, eastern Muslim parties are very fragmented and have lost their political strength. Eastern Muslims vehemently oppose the LTTE's proposal for an interim authority, but the President will likely ignore their repeated requests to participate in any future peace negotiations. Rather than acting as a roadblock to an eventual settlement between the GSL and the LTTE, or fully participating in future peace talks, the badly fractured eastern Muslim polity is likely to pose little more than a speed bump that the GSL and LTTE can easily drive over on the road to a lasting political settlement. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) Sri Lanka's 1.5 million Tamil-speaking Muslims are moderate Sunnis and may be viewed as two groups. The larger group, (two-thirds of the Muslims) is comprised of traders and businesspeople scattered in central, western, and southern Sri Lanka. The remaining one-third is comprised of fishermen and farmers concentrated in the east. The two groups are largely indifferent to each other's political concerns.

3. (U) Many members of the larger, "majority" Muslim group are wealthy, and in addition to speaking Tamil, usually also speak Sinhala. Majority Muslims have long aligned themselves with large Sinhalese-dominated parties, and often see Muslim "communal" parties like the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) as radical. According to many Muslim and non-Muslim interlocutors, majority Muslims -- nearly all businesspeople -- care about the business implications of the peace process.

They did not experience the conflict in the same (often devastating) way northern and eastern Muslims did and are only somewhat concerned with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) proposals for an Interim Self-Governing Authority (ISGA) in the north and east. Majority Muslims nominally care about the fate of eastern Muslims and their experiences in the conflict, but have not applied much political pressure to aid Eastern Muslims. They are reluctant to antagonize the Sinhalese, lest they lose market share in the primarily Sinhalese areas in which they do business. Getting along is important to them. Majority Muslims draw their elite from Colombo and Kandy, and perceive eastern Muslims to be lower in status.

4. (U) Eastern Muslims typically speak only Tamil and are roughly a third of the population in the east, the highest concentration of Muslims in Sri Lanka. In contrast to majority Muslims, eastern Muslims are deeply concerned about the LTTE and its ISGA proposals because they do not feel secure in LTTE areas. They have good reason: during the conflict (and in some cases after the 2002 cease-fire agreement (CFA)), the LTTE intimidated, abducted, extorted, and murdered Muslims in the north and east. The LTTE also appropriated many Muslims' land, a critical issue for eastern Muslim farmers in particular. In 1990, the LTTE forced 50,000 Muslims out of the north in 24 hours and demanded that valuables, jewelry, and land deeds be left behind. Almost 15 years later, thousands of northern Muslims are still displaced and live in welfare centers in Puttalam and Anuradhapura. Only about 100 Muslim families have returned to Jaffna.

5. (C) Eastern Muslims have an ambivalent relationship with the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL). While the GSL did not always protect them from LTTE aggression, GSL security forces were their only hope for protection for two decades. Eastern Muslims demand that their lands be returned to them and that

the GSL protect them from further LTTE terrorism. Many are skeptical about LTTE assurances that they will be treated fairly under an ISGA, and are angry that the GSL has not allowed a separate Muslim delegation to enter the peace process. One such skeptic, S. Zubaideen, Joint Secretary of the Peace Foundation in Akkaraipattu (60 km south of Batticaloa), told poloff that the LTTE "will never change" and explained that Muslims fear a double standard in which Muslims would have no rights under an ISGA. Despite their concerns, eastern Muslims still think it is important to maintain cordial relations with the Sinhalese and with majority Muslims.

Genesis of the SLMC

16. (U) While they represent 8.5% of the population, the Muslim polity is by no means monolithic. Their voting base is fractured, denying Muslims the political strength their numbers might otherwise grant them. After independence in 1948, Muslims traditionally voted with Sinhalese majority parties, especially the United National Party (UNP). In the ensuing decades, about 10 to 20 percent of Muslims began to support the other major majority party, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). Not until the early 1980s did a distinct Muslim political identity emerge - and an eastern Muslim identity at that. After the 1983 riots, in which about a thousand Tamils were killed in government-sponsored violence, Muslims began to feel more insecure about their own position as a minority group in Sri Lanka. Many eastern Muslims began to feel that the Sinhalese majority parties, specifically the UNP, did not address perceived Muslim injustices in government employment and education. In response, M.H.M. Ashraff, a prominent Muslim politician and lawyer from the east, formed the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) in 1987. Ashraff, who had previously aligned himself with the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) to address minority issues, was motivated by the experiences of conflict-affected northern and eastern Muslims. Ashraff's desire to address their needs via a "communal" political party found immediate success: the SLMC's debut in the 1989 parliamentary election yielded 4 seats. In the 1994 election, the SLMC garnered 10 seats. In a break with traditional Muslim loyalty to the UNP, party leader Ashraff supported then Prime Minister Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga's government and was rewarded with powerful ministerial portfolios in ports and shipping.

17. (U) While the SLMC garnered an impressive 25 to 30 percent of the Muslim vote, most Muslims still voted with Sinhalese majority parties. In the late 1990s, Ashraff began thinking about expanding the SLMC's base from eastern Muslims to Muslims nation-wide. His idea for a national platform yielded the 1999 formation of the National Unity Alliance (NUA), designed to enlist the support of Muslims and other groups, including Buddhists. The NUA, legally an offshoot of the SLMC, was never officially registered as an independent party. Muslim interlocutors told poloff that Ashraff, who made his mark as the leader of the "communal" SLMC, planned to expand the NUA into a national political party, with Ashraff at the helm. He never accomplished his goal. In September 2000, Ashraff was killed in a helicopter crash in eastern Sri Lanka.

The SLMC Fractures

18. (U) Whatever unity the young SLMC enjoyed quickly vanished when Ashraff died. Ashraff's hitherto politically inexperienced widow, Ferial Ashraff, and his protg Rauf Hakeem fought bitterly for the leadership of the party. Their battle resulted in an SLMC divided into two camps: Rauf Hakeem as leader of the party, and Ferial Ashraff as the leader of the NUA. Hakeem's opponents cited his relative youth (at the time he was 40 years old) and lack of eastern heritage (Hakeem is from Kandy) as reasons he should not lead the SLMC. Ferial Ashraff's opponents derided her lack of political background, her hometown (also near Kandy), and expressed concern about a woman leading the party. Hakeem and the SLMC later threw their support behind the UNP after the December 2001 election, allowing Ranil Wickremesinghe to become Prime Minister, while Ferial Ashraff's (still "communal") NUA supported President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga's SLFP.

19. (C) Even after the early 2001 split, the SLMC continued to fracture. Senior SLMC member A.L.M. Attaullah formed the National Muslim Congress (NMC) in 2002 in protest against Hakeem's leadership. Later in 2002, a group of politicians calling themselves the Ashraff Congress also challenged Hakeem's leadership and broke away from the SLMC. These groups were angry that Hakeem failed to consult senior SLMC leaders about major party decisions--notably Hakeem's decision to sign an agreement with the UNP in 2001 and to

negotiate a separate agreement guaranteeing Muslim security and participation in the peace talks with LTTE leader Prabhakaran in 2001. (Comment: Prabhakaran has largely ignored this agreement. End Comment). In the April parliamentary election, National Muslim Congress members and Ashraff Congress members threw their support to the President's coalition, the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA). According to Ashraff Congress member S. Shahibdeen, Hakeem failed to convince the international community about Muslim participation in the peace talks and also failed to address the issues of Muslim internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Puttalam. (Hakeem lost the votes of 35,000 Muslim voters in Puttalam to the UNP.) The Ashraff Congress itself split in 2004, dividing into the Democratic Unity Alliance (without parliamentary representation) and the original Ashraff Congress group. Some interlocutors observe that while the Ashraff Congress is trying to become an umbrella group for various Muslim politicians, no one takes it seriously. People are even more disdainful of the DUA, which some see as an opportunist group ready to upset the applecart for the highest bidder--which, in the case of the April election--was the President. According to Rauf Hakeem, the SLMC's success in obtaining a Muslim mandate and becoming a force in forming governments gives SLMC politicians crucial leverage that others try to destroy. The lure of majority party perks continue to draw Muslim MPs away from the contested SLMC center, most recently in October when four SLMC MPs (who had also fought Hakeem) jumped to the UPFA and were granted non-cabinet ministerships (see Reftel).

Muslim Political Groups - No Longer Kingmakers

10. (C) The SLMC's status as kingmaker in recent governments has diminished considerably. The growing importance of a smaller parties like the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) and Ceylon Worker's Congress (CWC) has reduced the SLMC's bargaining power to make or break UNP and SLFP governments. After the April 2004 parliamentary election, SLMC leader Rauf Hakeem told poloffs that his party had the numbers to give the President's coalition a majority, but refused to do so. Hakeem held out for the President's assurance that she would not attempt to form a constituent assembly and for Muslim representation at the peace talks. Hakeem added that he thought a constituent assembly would further destabilize the government and expressed support for the executive presidency, which he said is good for Muslim interests and offers minorities crucial leverage in selecting the president. He noted that the UPFA asked him to join the coalition with the promises of discussing his requests "later." The SLMC declined to support the UPFA.

11. (U) Muslims make up more slots in Parliament than the SLMC's beleaguered history reveals. Only 30 to 35 percent of Muslims now vote with the SLMC; the other 65 to 70 percent vote with the UNP or SLFP (and of those, more Muslims vote for their traditional choice, the UNP). Even though there are 24 Muslim MPs in parliament, however, they have been unable to unite as a single force. In past years, various attempts to create a Muslim voting block (for example, the now-defunct Muslim Parliamentary Group), have failed. Overall Muslim representation in parliament spans the political spectrum - from the JVP to the SLMC:

- UNP: 7,
- UPFA: 11 (of which 2 JVP, 2 NMC, 2 NUA, 1 PA, 4 SLMC breakaway),
- SLMC: 6.

Eastern Muslim Opposition to ISGA

12. (C) While majority Muslims are often indifferent to the LTTE's ISGA proposals, eastern Muslims desperately oppose them and want a voice in the President's handling of the peace process. SLMC leader Rauf Hakeem explained to poloffs that, "...it is widely accepted that Muslims are important stakeholders in the peace process," and that the present government has marginalized Muslim participation in the peace process. Hakeem, who participated in six rounds of peace talks under Ranil Wickremesinghe's government, asserted that talks should be reformulated so Muslims' proper status in the process is restored. Hakeem claimed that there must be three separate proposals on the table: from Muslims, the LTTE, and the GSL. Hakeem, however, has not submitted any proposals, and when asked about what theoretical Muslim proposals might include was vague. Minister of Housing and Construction, Industry and Eastern Province Education and Irrigation Development and NUA leader Ferial Ashraff told poloffs that the LTTE wants everything for itself, and noted that Muslims who want to be involved in the peace process are not being consulted at all. She commented that while the LTTE guarantees a place for Muslims in an ISGA, she lamented the lack of communication between Muslims and the LTTE and worried that Muslims will have no say about how they will be

represented. M.I.M. Mohideen, leader of the Muslim Rights Organization, voiced the fears of many Muslims - that the ISGA is actually a permanent arrangement. He told poloff about the eastern Muslim desire for their own "traditional homeland" in which Muslims live together, independently, with security.

Comment

13. (C) As vehemently as eastern Muslim politicians decry their lack of representation in the peace process and in future negotiations for an interim governing arrangement in the north and east, it seems likely the President will ignore their demands. When the SLMC functioned as "kingmaker" in Ranil Wickremesinghe's parliament, its power to influence the peace process was much greater. Now that the President has assured her coalition's majority in parliament (just in time for budget season) from the CWC and angry SLMC defectors, Hakeem's mainline SLMC is decreasingly relevant. SLMC interlocutors charged that the President is trying to destroy the SLMC by "buying off" MPs. While her long history of meddling with the SLMC supports this accusation, the President is probably only taking advantage of the opportunity the SLMC's internal fragmentation and leadership crisis present. Hakeem is clearly a divisive figure for eastern Muslims, but no other politician has emerged to take his place. The SLMC's ability to become relevant will depend on whether and how the party's leadership crisis is resolved. Although Muslim leaders like Hakeem and Ferial Ashraff express hope that the rift in the eastern Muslim polity will heal and SLMC strength will be restored, there are no indications that this will be reality anytime soon.

14. (C) Meanwhile, the idea of Muslim interim arrangement proposals does not enjoy widespread support outside of the fragmented eastern Muslim polity, half of which is now part of the President's coalition. Hakeem's seeming discomfort and indecision about what a Muslim proposal would really look like further complicates its viability. Majority Muslims may have the numerical might to augment eastern Muslim opposition to the ISGA, but they lack the political will to do so. The GSL, which never went to great lengths to protect northeastern Muslims in the first place, wants and needs a settlement with the LTTE badly enough that it will likely ignore eastern Muslim opposition to an interim arrangement. The LTTE, which sees Muslims as competition for resources and an impediment to their influence in the east, is also more than happy to ignore Muslim concerns. Rather than acting as a roadblock to any eventual settlement between the GSL and the LTTE, or as a full participant in the peace process, the badly fractured eastern Muslim polity is likely to be a speed bump the GSL and LTTE easily drive over on the road to a lasting political settlement.

LUNSTEAD